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TAGS: PHUM PGOV UP

SUBJECT: UKRAINE: VISIT OF PATRIARCH BARTHOLOMEW SPURS
HOPES FOR UNIFIED ORTHODOX CHURCH

Classified By: Acting PolCouns Robert Scott for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, the spiritual leader of Eastern Orthodoxy, arrived in Ukraine on July 24 for a five day visit to celebrate the 1,020th anniversary of the christianization of the Kyivan Rus. Although he has no jurisdiction over other Orthodox patriarchs, Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople is viewed as the spiritual leader and primary spokesman for Eastern Orthodoxy and many anticipated his visit might help begin resolve the long-running split within Ukraine's Orthodox community and lend support for President Yushchenko's push to establish a unified Orthodox church free from Russian influence. Russian Patriarch Alexiy II also attended the celebrations.

¶2. (SBU) Comment: It appears that Yushchenko's gambit to invite Bartholomew to the celebrations, despite the apparent displeasure of the Russian Orthodox Church, paid off with several statements from the Constantinople Patriarch expressing general support for an independent and unified Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Resolving the split within Ukraine's Orthodox community and limiting the influence of Russia, as maintained through Ukraine's largest Orthodox community, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church - Moscow Patriarchate, has been an ongoing Yushchenko goal. This visit appears to have given impetus to Yushchenko's hopes for greater independence from Russian influence in religious affairs. End of Summary and Comment.

President Pushes for Independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church

¶3. (U) Bartholomew's visit received high level attention, with President Yushchenko, senior GoU officials, the leaders of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church - Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) greeting Bartholomew I on his arrival at Boryspil Airport on 24 July. Many hoped that the Ecumenical Patriarch would take an official position on the split between Ukraine's UOC-MP, a branch of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP), which is not officially recognized by Constantinople and is considered to be schismatic by the ROC. President Yushchenko, who has long sought to unify Ukraine's divided Orthodox churches under Ukrainian leadership, is viewed as a strong supporter of the UOC-KP and its controversial leader Patriarch Filaret. PM Tymoshenko was conspicuously absent from the event, claiming she was too busy dealing with the recent floods in western Ukraine.

¶4. (U) Bartholomew's visit was marked by highly publicized ceremonial events at religiously significant sites in Kyiv including Sofiyska Square, the Hill of Saint Volodymyr of Kyiv, and the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra. Orthodox leaders from several countries were present at the events including the

Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Aleksiy II, who is seen by some as a rival of Patriarch Bartholomew. Orthodox leaders from France, Austria, Jerusalem, Albania, Greece, Poland, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romania also attended the ceremonies, which some observers interpreted as a sign of their support for an independent Ukrainian church.

Ecumenical Patriarch Successfully Walks Tightrope

¶5. (U) Observers anxiously waited to see if Bartholomew would take an official position on the status of the feuding Ukrainian Orthodox churches. President Yushchenko was clearly hoping that the visit would help to establish an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church separate from the ROC, and said that Patriarch Bartholomew's visit to Ukraine provided &important momentum for unification of Ukrainian Churches and the faithful.⁸ At the end of the visit, the President expressed his satisfaction that the Ecumenical Patriarch supported the will of Ukrainians to have a national Church of their own.

¶6. (U) For his part, Bartholomew found himself walking a fine line between his host's well known desire for him to recognize an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the opposition of such a move from Eastern Orthodoxy's most powerful national Patriarch, Russian Patriarch Aleksiy II, who clearly wants Moscow to maintain its jurisdiction over the UOC-MP, Ukraine's largest Orthodox community. Media observers noted that Yushchenko warmly greeted Bartholomew in public, but was noticeably more reserved with Aleksiy. The media also commented on the competing posters plastered throughout Kyiv of Yushchenko together with Bartholomew and a

separate poster of Aleksiy with the words "Ukraine welcomes its own Patriarch". Media reported that the posters of Aleksiy were paid for by Kyiv Party of Regions politician Vasyl Horbal.

¶7. (U) Throughout his visit, Bartholomew made general statements in support of an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church, but stopped short of recognizing an independent Ukrainian Church under jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. On July 26, he said that the "mother church has the right to support within existing Orthodox tradition any constructive and promising proposal, which would eliminate dangerous splits in the church body as soon as possible...Various political and church difficulties caused by existing mishmash are obvious and known from the long historic past. Taking care to protect and restore church unity is our common duty, which is above any political or church goals." On July 27, Bartholomew and Aleksiy made a joint statement, emphasizing their agreement to address all issues through dialogue, and to bring all unresolved questions to the attention of delegations of both churches.

¶8. (U) For his part, Russian Patriarch Aleksiy II called for spiritual unity between Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian peoples. Many observers noted that he canceled his planned visit to Donetsk scheduled for July 29. According to the press-secretary of the Metropolitan of Donetsk and Mariupol, &the Patriarch was very upset. He planned (the trip) and seriously intended to visit Donetsk Oblast. However, the trip was obstructed by his age and depression over some episodes that happened in Kyiv.⁸

Russian MFA Concerned by Poor Treatment of Aleksiy

¶9. (U) The media reported that Russia's MFA complained on July 25 about the "disrespectful" treatment of the Russian Orthodox Church leader and the trampling of sensitivities of millions of believers in Russia and Ukraine. In a counterstatement, Ukraine's MFA replied that it was concerned about Russian &politicized and unfair⁸ assessments regarding internal events that were put forward &without diplomatic delicacy.⁸ The GoU expressed concern about the "unfounded accusation by the Russian side of disrespectful

treatment of the Russian Orthodox Church clergy during their participation in marking the 1,020th anniversary of baptizing Kyivan Rus." According to the MFA spokesman, all these activities &were in line with national legislation and should not have negative implications for high level Ukrainian-Russian cooperation.⁸

Yushchenko Took Risk in inviting Ecumenical Patriarch

¶10. (C) Deputy Head of the Presidential Secretary Oleksandr Chaliy told DAS Merkel and the Ambassador during a July 25 meeting that the presence of Aleksiy II represented a "deep diplomatic moment" in Ukraine-Russian relations. According to Chaliy, Russian President Medvedev warned Yushchenko a month ago that the Russian Patriarch would not attend the ceremonies in Kyiv if the Ecumenical Patriarch would be in attendance. The participation of Bartholomew would be seen as part of Yushchenko's attempt to legitimize the as yet unrecognized independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Chaliy argued that Aleksiy's attendance could therefore be characterized as a diplomatic victory for Yushchenko, who took a risk by hosting the Ecumenical Patriarch.

¶11. (U) In an interview following the visit, the head of the State Committee of Nationalities and Religions (SCNR), Oleksandr Sagan, told reporters that despite the ROC's attempts to discourage Orthodox leaders from attending the celebration, the level of representation was quite high. Sagan, who is a strong supporter of Yushchenko's efforts to unite Ukraine's Orthodox community, said that Moscow would resist a move to unify the divided churches under the Patriarchate of Constantinople because it would cause the ROC to lose 11,000 UOC-MP parishes, as well as symbolically important ties to its historical origins. Sagan added that the unification may happen sooner than expected if "church politicians" do not interfere with the process.

Win for Constantinople, Loss for Moscow

¶12. (C) Oleksandr Zayets of the Institute for Religious Freedom told PolOff on July 31 that President Yushchenko made a point of warmly welcoming Bartholomew while "humiliating" Aleksiy, probably in retaliation for Russian attempts to interfere in Ukrainian affairs he opined. He said that Yushchenko's decision to invite Bartholomew to the

celebration, which was made only a month before the event, came as a shock and disappointment to Aleksiy. Zayets said that the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople appeared to be gaining the upper hand in its long struggle with the Russian Patriarchate for influence over the Orthodox faithful throughout the Orthodox world. Ukraine figured large in the calculations of both patriarchs and Zayets expected significant changes to come out of an upcoming conference of Orthodox leaders in Istanbul later this year. Zayets outlined two possible scenarios coming out of the conference; the UOC-KP and Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church joined together as a Metropolia under the jurisdiction of the Constantinople Patriarchate or an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church led by a patriarch and recognized by Constantinople. In either of these scenarios, he felt that the UOC-KP's Patriarch Filaret would vie for church leadership. (Comment: Relations between the UOC-KP and UAOC have been tense since their unification talks failed two years ago. Their respective leaders, Filaret and Mefodiy, were unable to agree on who should lead an independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church. End Comment.) Zayets saw the absence of both Filaret and Mefodiy during the visit as a possible sign that they have overcome their past differences.

He felt that many of the UOC-MP faithful currently belonging to its 11,000 parishes would switch allegiance to an independent Ukrainian church.

¶13. (C) Zayets commented that Aleksiy's heavy-handed efforts to exert influence through the UOC-MP in the lead-up to the celebration backfired because of his disrespectful attitude

towards Ukrainian sensitivities. He believed that the Russian Orthodox Church and GoR may consider a reorganization of church/state relations and a shake-up of those responsible for foreign relations within the ROC because of Yushchenko's perceived success in thwarting ROC ambitions during the celebration. He said that Aleksiy's decision to not visit Donetsk on July 29 was likely due to expected poor turn-out of the faithful because of their sense of alienation towards Aleksiy as well as traditional apathy of churchgoers in the oblast. Zayets noted that Prime Minister Tymoshenko was conspicuously absent during the visit and did not believe her explanation that she was too busy with the floods in western Ukraine. He said her absence was more likely due to her ongoing differences with Yushchenko and noted that even opposition leader and former PM Yanukovych met separately with Bartholomew during his visit.

¶14. (U) Visit Embassy Kyiv's classified website:

www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/kiev.

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